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WE THE AMERICANS
OUR EDUCATION

U. S. Department of Commerce
Social and Economic Statistics Administration
BUREAU OF THE CENSUS

WE THE AMERICANS: OUR EDUCATION

No. 8 in a series
of reports from
the 1970 Census

Children...teenagers...adults...Americans go to school. The latest census (April 1, 1970) shows almost 60 million of us enrolled in classes ranging from nursery school up to the postgraduate college level. That's nearly every third person counted in the census and almost equals the entire population of the United States in 1890.

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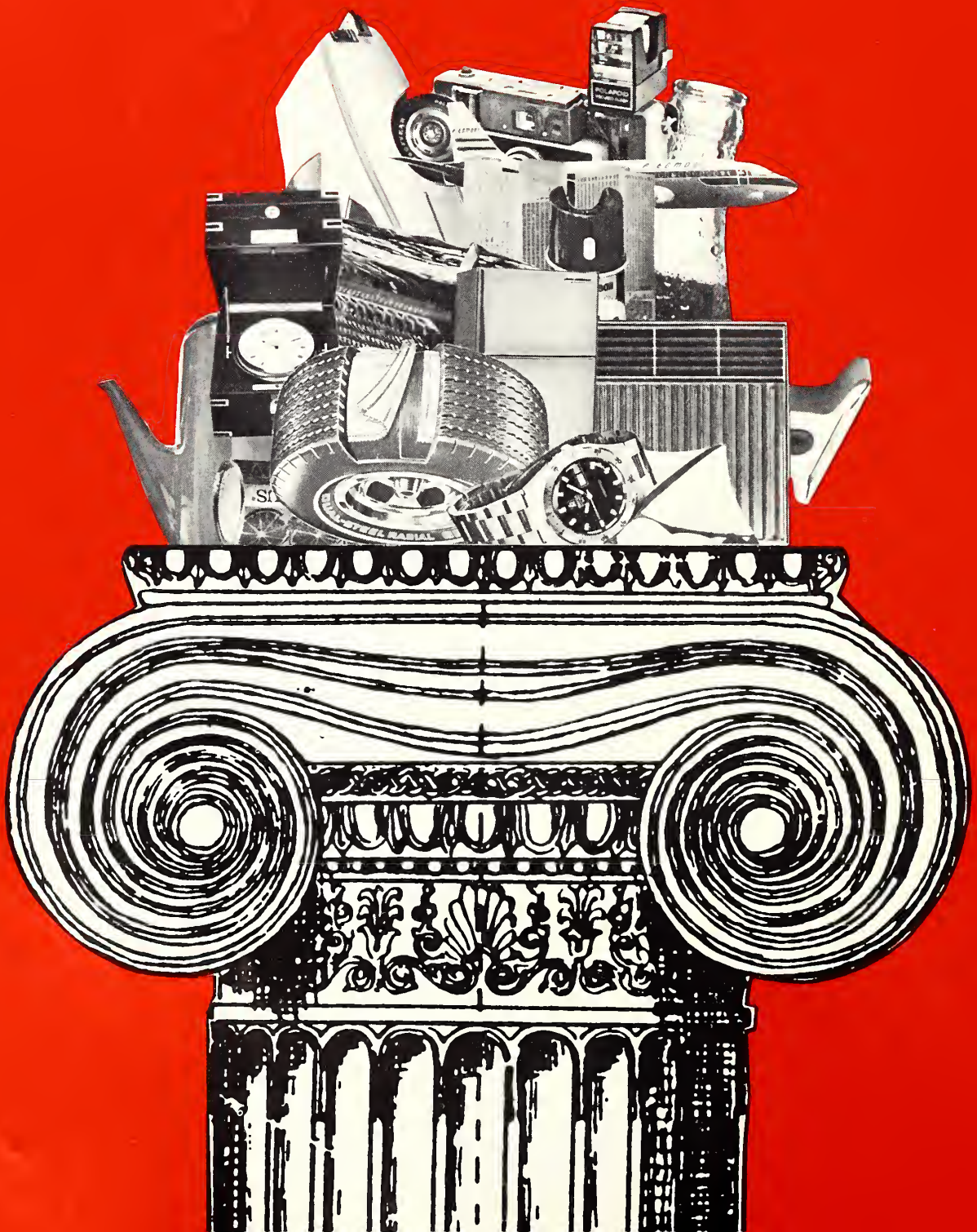
We Americans are known for many achievements—our standard of living—our discoveries and inventions—our ability to organize and overcome problems. We tend to think of these achievements in terms of material things—things like frozen foods, space vehicles, and computers, even spray cans and electric guitars. But as important as these are, they are only by products of America's greatest achievement—the ever increasing level of education of its population.



The 1970 census tells us many things about our education, such as:

- A greater proportion of Americans than ever before is going to school.
- We are starting school at an earlier age and staying in school longer.
- For the first time, the average American adult has completed high school.
- People who live in urban areas have a higher level of education than those in rural areas.
- Although a higher percentage of whites finish high school than blacks or those of Spanish ancestry, these minorities are closing the gap.
- There is a definite relationship between level of education and the kinds of jobs people hold, and how much they are paid.

Nearly 60 Million in School

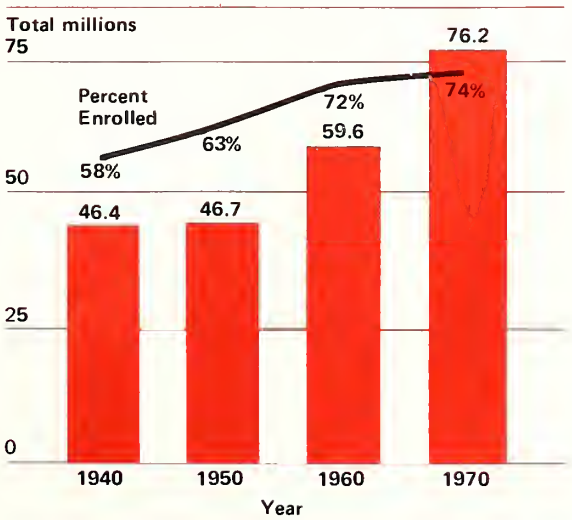
In 1970, there were 59.5 million of us going to school. Of this number, 51.2 million were white, 7.4 million black, and 3.2 million shared a Spanish heritage.

1970 School Enrollment

Level	White	Black	Spanish Heritage
Nursery	805,000	128,000	51,000
Kindergarten	2.6 million	356,000	189,000
Elementary	28.2 "	4.6 million	2.0 million
High School	12.5 "	1.8 "	699,000
College	6.4 "	431,000	223,000

Because the population of the United States has grown tremendously in the last 30 years, it's not surprising to find that the number of us going to school is greater now than in 1940. More important, the proportion of Americans of school age (5 to 24 years old) actually going to classes also has steadily grown.

School Age Population and Percent Enrolled

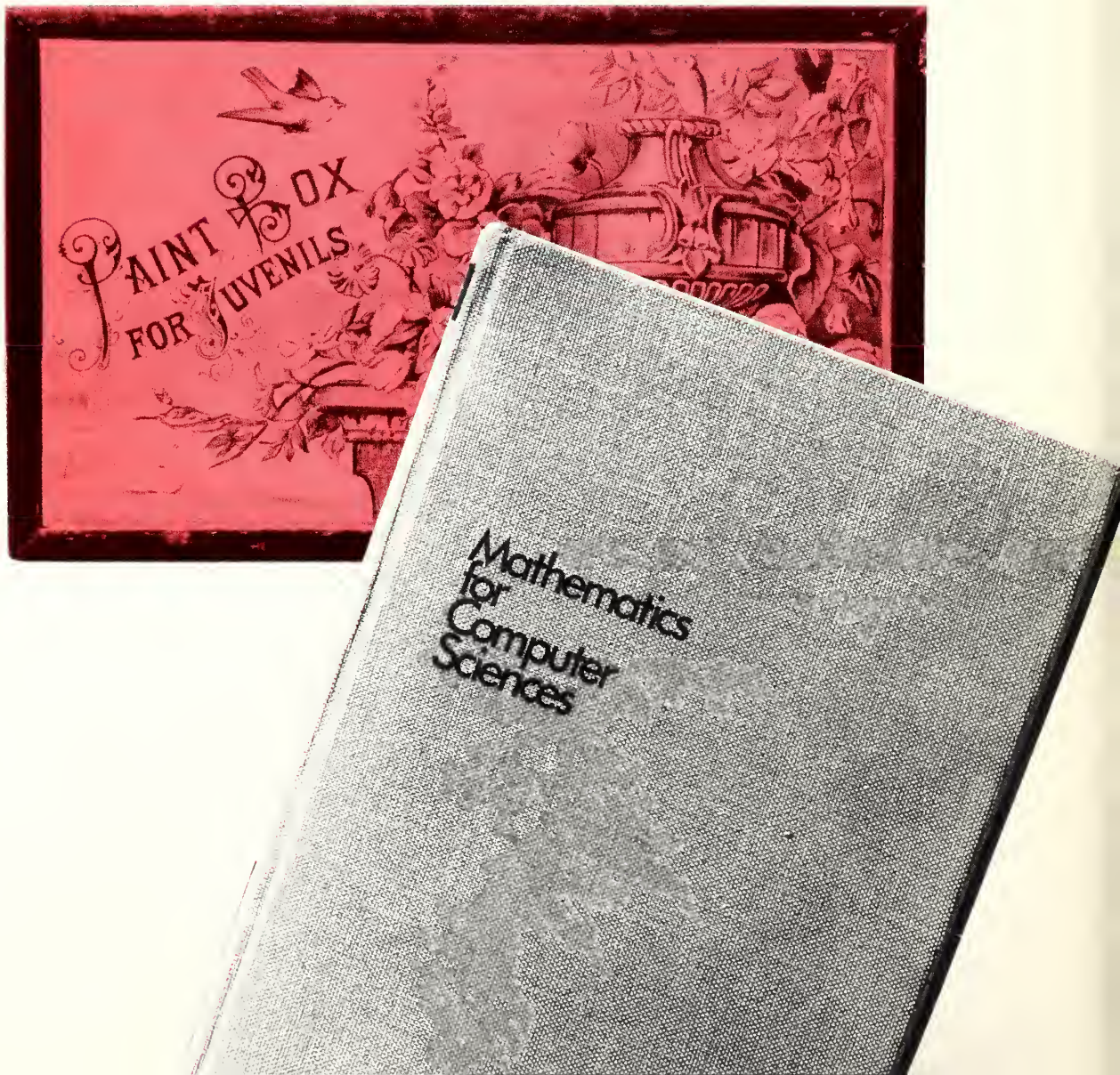


Starting Earlier, Staying Longer

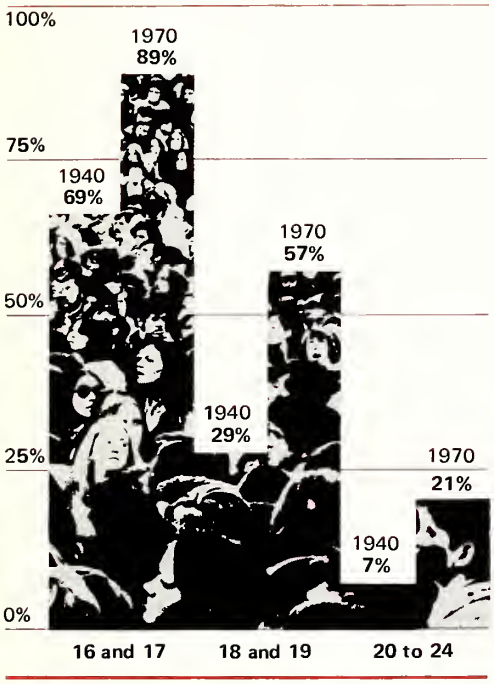
Not only are more of us going to school, but we are starting earlier and staying longer. Since the turn of the century, it has been compulsory for almost all children between the ages of 7 and 15 to go to school. But this has not been true for those between 16 and 24---the final years of high school and the college years. Those 18 and 19 years old were twice as likely to be going to school in 1970 as in 1940. The proportion in college more than tripled.

College enrollment figures provide a dramatic example of the American desire for more education---and our ability to turn that desire into reality. In 1960, nearly 3 million students were taking college courses. By 1970, that figure had more than doubled to 7 million. Enrollment in nursery school was close to 1 million in 1970, a 100 percent increase in just 5 years.

In 1970, 54 percent of all Americans from 3 to 34 years old were enrolled in school at some



Going to School by Age



level. Among the major geographic regions there was little difference in the total enrollment percentages. This is also true for the 7 to 15 age range, because attendance is mandatory by law. But for nursery school and kindergarten children and college students regional differences appear. In the Northeast, 80 percent of 5 and 6 year olds were going to school, while in the South the proportion was 60 percent. And almost twice the percentage of people aged 22 through 34 were going to school in the West as in the South.

How Much Schooling?

The 1970 census shows that for the first time in the Nation's history more than half of the adult population---52 percent----had finished high school. The percentage of young adults 18 to 24 years old was even higher---73 percent.

Part of the rising level of educational attainment is the natural replacement of older generations by younger people, who have had better educational opportunities than older Americans.

ENROLLMENT BY AGE

Region	3 and 4 Years	5 and 6 Years	18 and 19 Years	20 and 21 Years	22–24 Years	25–34 Years
United States	13%	72%	57%	31%	15%	6%
Northeast	14%	80%	60%	34%	15%	6%
North Central	10%	76%	58%	33%	15%	6%
South	12%	60%	52%	26%	12%	5%
West	17%	79%	58%	31%	19%	9%

Adult Population by Years of School Completed

Year	None	1–4 Years	Elementary	High School	1–3 Years College	4 or More Years of College
1970	2%	4%	13%	31%	11%	11%
1960	2%	6%	18%	25%	9%	8%
1950	3%	8%	20%	20%	7%	6%
1940	4%	10%	28%	14%	5%	5%

Another way to gauge the increase in educational attainment is by the number of school years completed. Among people 25 and over, there has been a steady growth from a median of 8.6 years in 1940 to 12.1 years in 1970.

Using years of school completed as a yardstick we can identify various problems in America by measuring differences among regions and States, between men and women, between urban and rural residents, and among the races.

Where We Live Makes a Difference

There is a direct relationship between our educational attainment and the size of the community where we live. Generally, people who live in rural areas have completed less school than those in urban areas. In 1970, the average adult in urban areas had gone to school one full year more than the average adult in rural areas.

There are differences within these areas, too. In rural areas those who live on farms have attended less school than those classified as nonfarm (people who live in towns with less than 2,500 population, or in open countryside). And in urban areas, educational attainment is higher in the surrounding suburbs than in central cities.

The areas rank as follows in median school years completed:

Urban	Years Completed
Suburbs	12.3
Towns of 10,000 or more	12.1
Towns of 2,500 to 10,000	12.0
Central cities	12.0
Total	12.2

Rural	Years Completed
Nonfarm	11.2
Farm	10.7
Total	11.1

Educational opportunities---and the means to take advantage of them----are clearly greatest in the suburbs of urban areas. In the suburbs, 62 percent of the adult population have graduated from high school. This compares with 51 percent in central cities, and 42 percent on farms.

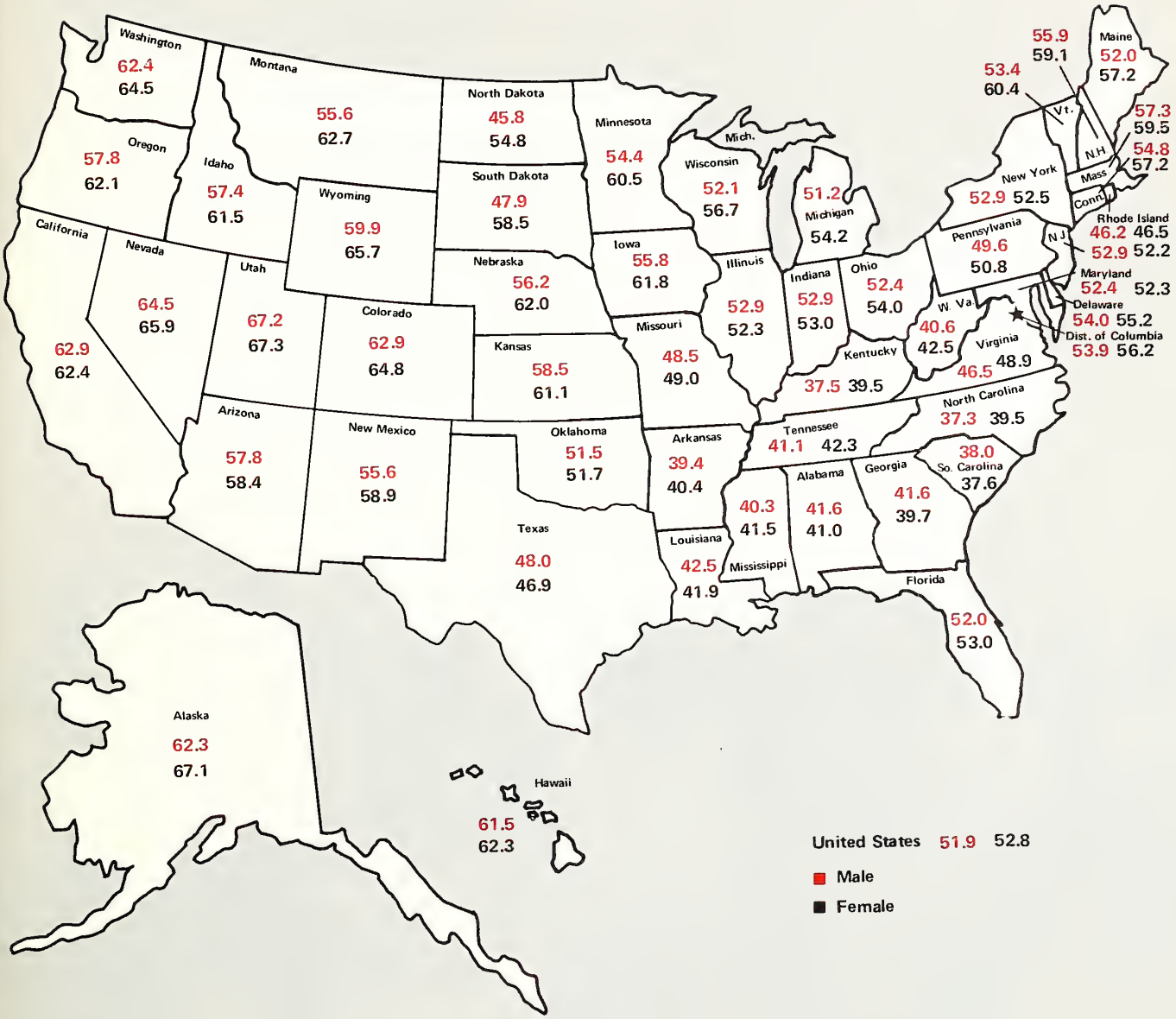
Men Caught Up in 1970

Nineteen seventy was the first year that men and women were equal in median years of school completed. In both 1950 and 1960, women had about a half year more of school, on average, than men. In 1970, both sexes had completed a median of 12.1 years.

For the last 30 years more women than men have completed 1 to 3 years of high school, finished high school, and attended 1 to 3 years of college. But each decade the number of men who are college graduates has been approximately 50 percent higher than for women.

Even though men and women now have the same educational attainment on a national basis, men have higher school attainment levels in only six States----Alaska, Arizona, California, New Mexico, Texas, and Utah. The widest gap between the sexes is in North Dakota, where females have completed 12.2 years, and males 10.8 years. The map shows the percentages of men and women who are at least high school graduates in each State:

Percentage of High School Graduates in 1970



Minority Groups Strive

The drive for education is nowhere more evident than among racial and ethnic minorities. In 1940, the average adult of black and other minority races had finished 5.8 years of school. By 1970, this figure was up to 10.0 years, a gain of 4.2 years compared with a 3.4-year gain for whites (from 8.7 years in 1940 to 12.1 years in 1970).

Minorities will doubtless close the gap even more as older persons who are less well educated are replaced by younger generations. About 55 percent of blacks 18 to 24 years old have a high school diploma compared with only 31 percent of all adult blacks.

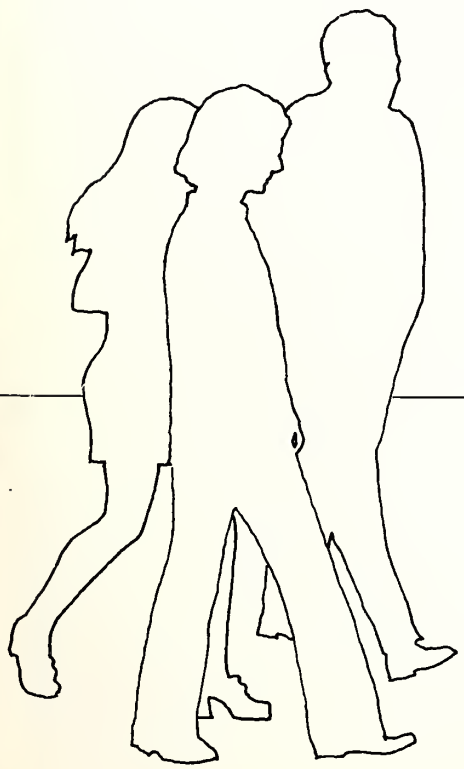
The median school years completed by the Spanish heritage population in 1970 was 9.6 years (this information was not recorded in earlier censuses). Again, the outlook is for increased educational attainment. Among adults, 36 percent had finished high school in 1970. Among younger persons of Spanish heritage, 52 percent were high school graduates.

More important, the percentages of 16 and 17 year olds going to school among these minorities are close to national average.

Illiteracy Low

The first question about educational attainment---"Can you read and write?"---was asked in the 1840 census. At that time, more than one in every five persons was illiterate. The general illiteracy rate decreased steadily over the years but was slowed in the late 1800's by the influx of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe.

Questions on illiteracy were dropped in the 1940 census. Recent studies show that, although the proportion of the population unable to read or write is small, the number of persons still may be quite large. A 1969 national survey showed 1 percent of the population over 14 years old to be illiterate--1.4 million Americans, of whom 890,000 were white and 510,000 were black. Among both, the largest group of illiterates was made up of elderly persons.



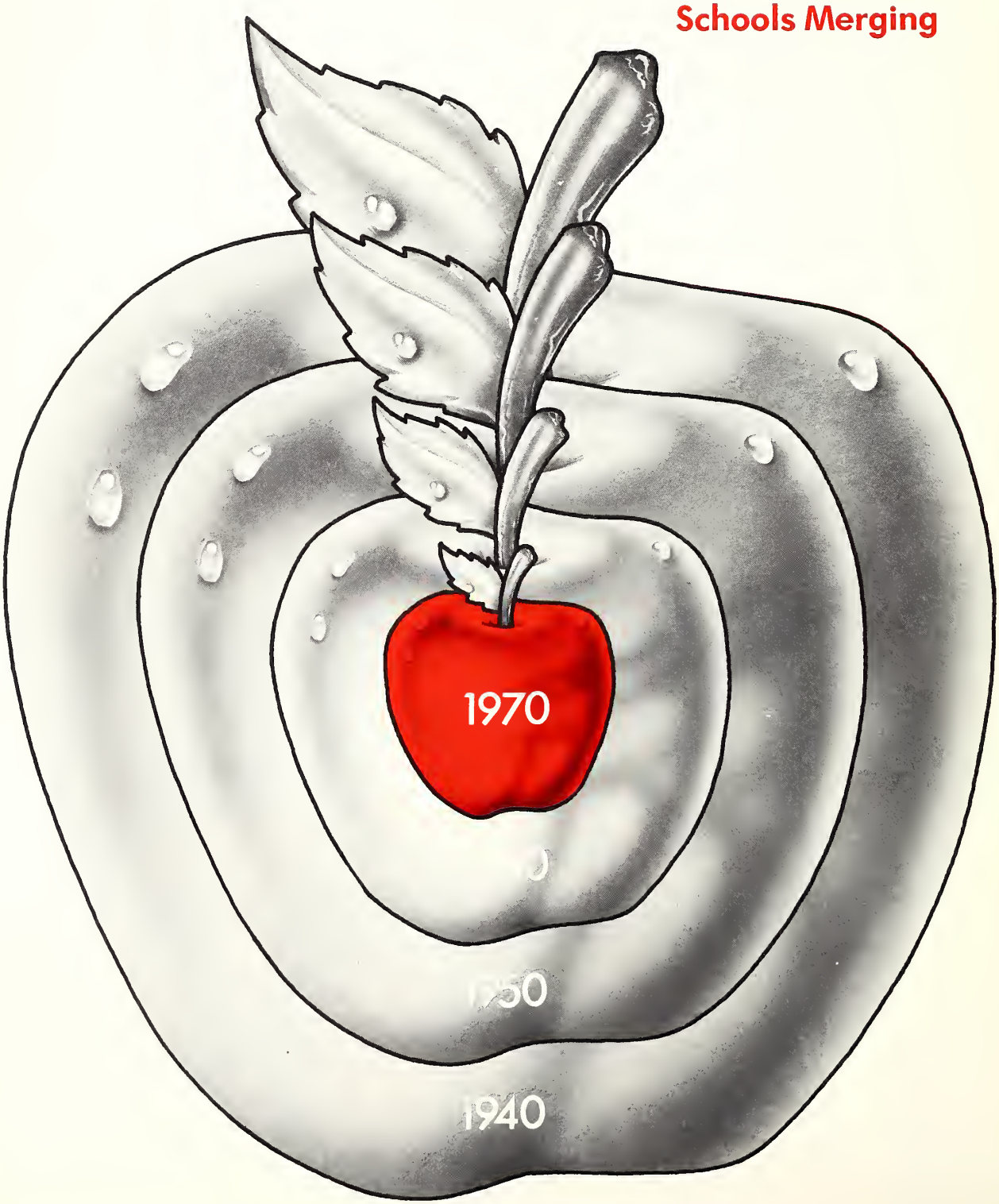
Who Drops Out?

Who drops out of school and where do they live? The 1970 census shows that dropouts are more likely to live in rural than in urban areas. Across the Nation, 15 percent of young men between 16 and 21 have not graduated from high school and are not going to school---1.3 million whites, 345,000 blacks and 139,000 of Spanish heritage.

The dropout rate was 14 percent in rural farm areas and 20 percent in small towns. In 1970, more than twice as many blacks and youths of Spanish heritage had quit high school than whites in the same age group.

More central city youths tend to become dropouts than their suburban neighbors. The 1970 dropout rate was 16 percent in central cities and 11 percent in suburbs. About one-quarter of black youths and youths of Spanish heritage in urban areas stop going to school before they graduate from high school---again, twice the rate of whites.

Schools Merging



We go to fewer schools now than we did in 1940. As urban areas grow together, school systems consolidate. And better transportation has cut the need for schools to serve isolated communities.

In 1940, there were more than 194,000 elementary schools. A majority---108,000---had only one teacher. By 1970 the number of elementary schools had declined to 81,000, and the number of one-room school houses dropped to only 2,100. During the same period, the number of high schools increased from 29,000 to more than 30,000. And colleges and universities increased by more than 50 percent from 1,700 to 2,600.

Much of the growth in higher education has been in 2-year colleges. In 1971, over 40 percent of all freshmen and sophomores were going to 2-year colleges.

The 2-year schools are obviously filling a need, because students going to these institutions are different from those attending 4-year schools. Students at 2-year colleges are twice as likely to be 20 years old or over, twice as likely to be married, almost three times as likely to be going to school on a part-time basis, and more than twice as likely to live in the West.

Public Schools Most Popular

Most Americans go to public schools. Between 1960 and 1970 the proportion of students going to private schools increased for kindergarten but declined for elementary and high schools.

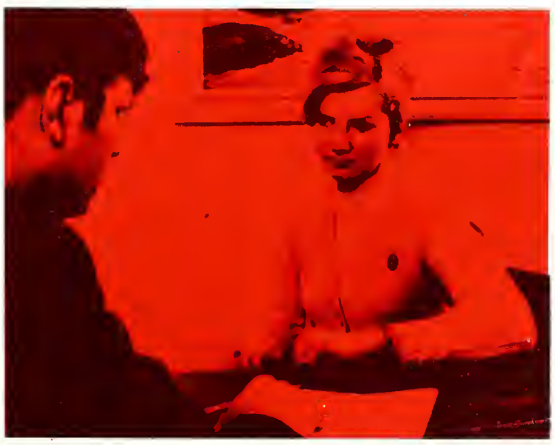
1970 Enrollment by Type of School

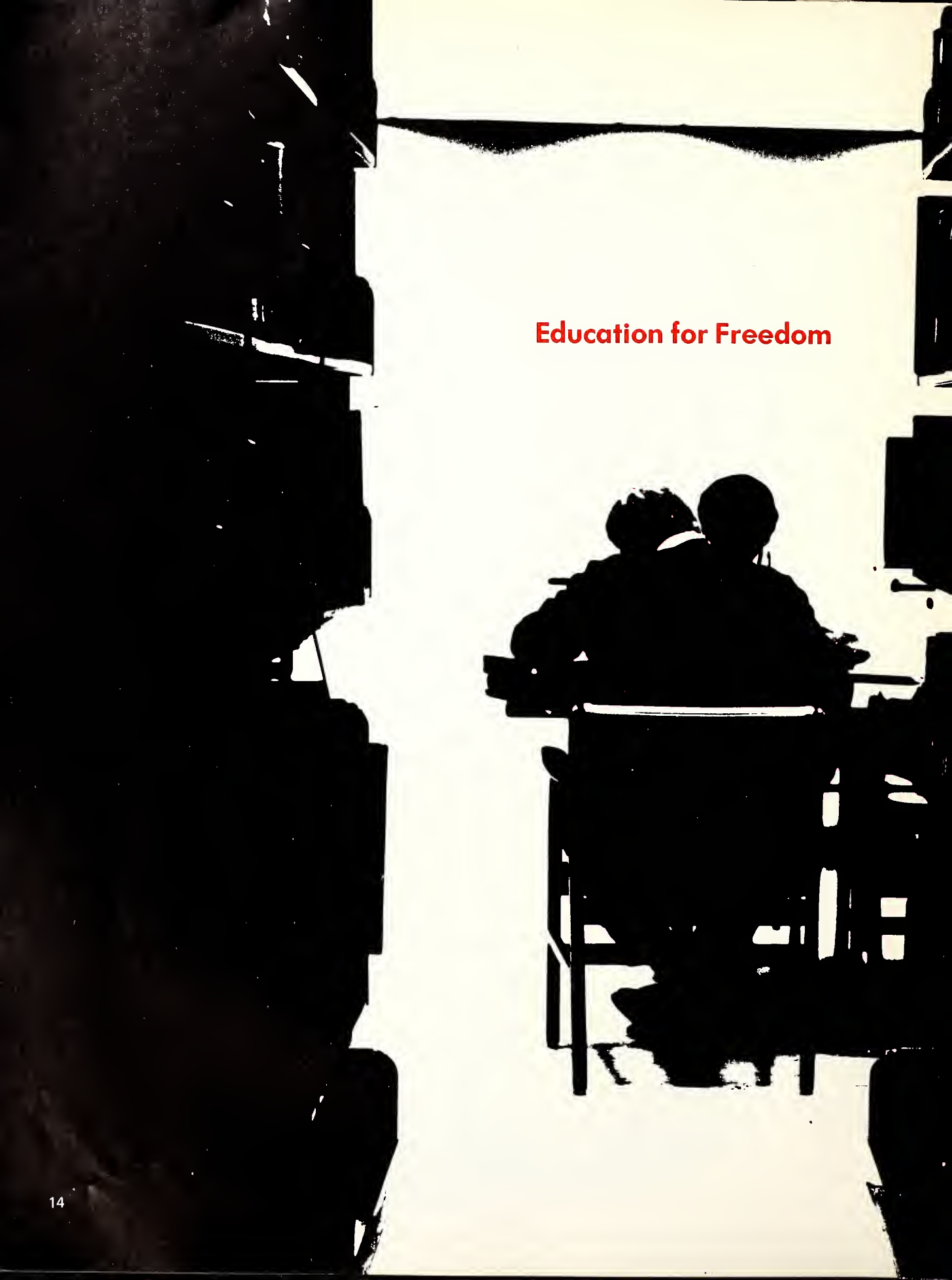
Level	Public	Parochial	Other Private
Nursery	32%	5%	63%
Kindergarten	84%	5%	11%
Elementary	89%	10%	1%
High School	90%	7%	3%
College	66%	34%	

Making the Most of Abilities

The advantages of a good education are many, but they boil down to one main point: having a good education gives a person the opportunity to make the most of his or her talents. This usually is viewed in terms of holding more desirable jobs---professional, technical, administrative, or managerial occupations. Only 9 percent of adult men who had not finished high school were in such positions in 1970. This compares with 21 percent of high school graduates, 44 percent of those with 1 to 3 years of college, and 80 percent of college graduates. The proportion of women in these job categories was somewhat lower for all educational levels except for college graduates.

Good jobs mean higher incomes. The 1970 census shows a direct correlation between level of education and income. Among men 18 and over, those who completed 8 years of elementary school had a median income of $5,350, compared with $7,500 for those completing high school, $7,200 for those with 1 to 3 years of college, and $11,900 for those with college degrees. The same relationship exists for women 18 and over, although the income levels are lower---$1,700 for those with an elementary school education, $3,100 for those with a high school diploma, $2,800 for those with 1 to 3 years of college, and $5,650 for college graduates.





Education for Freedom

In 1943 the President of Harvard University, James B. Conant, wrote: "The primary concern of American education today is not the development of the appreciation of the 'good life' in young gentlemen born to the purple...Our purpose is to cultivate in the largest possible number of future citizens an appreciation of both the responsibilities and the benefits which come to them because they are Americans and are free."

In the 30 years since those words were written, the United States has made great strides toward realizing that ideal. The median number of school years completed---showing the average American now has graduated from high school---is a decade ahead of projections published as recently as 1965. Experts now say if rates of school enrollment continue to increase as they did in the last 10 to 15 years, there may be 84 million Americans going to school in 1990. And if our rate of educational attainment continues to increase as it has, the average adult in 1990 will have finished 12.6 years of school. Some 75 percent will be at least high school graduates, including more than one-third who will have some college experience.

The quality of life in America's future is inseparably bound to the quality---and quantity---of education obtained by each of its citizens.

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